

IDOL THREATS

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Acts 17:22-31

My first call in ministry was to the First Presbyterian Church in Columbia, Tennessee. Columbia is about an hour south of Nashville. I was called to be the associate pastor. My chief responsibility was over the youth program. One year I organized a youth musical. This was a big event and we prepared for weeks to put it together. I scheduled our final rehearsal—a dress rehearsal—for the Sunday afternoon before the performance. That morning, at church, one of the girls in the performance came up to me and said that she could not be at the dress rehearsal that afternoon. Her reason was that her mother wanted to take her shopping. Shopping was an event because this was the early '90s and the Cool Springs Galleria in Franklin had just opened.¹

To say that I was disappointed in this girl's choice is an understatement. The fact that the girl would miss dress rehearsal was not the end of the world. The show would go on. With kids you learn that there are always conflicts with school and sports and family. I was upset, however, that she was just going shopping. I was even more upset with her mother who thought it okay to take the daughter shopping when there was the performance coming up. Where was that family's sense of commitment? What was the mother teaching the daughter by this example? Where were their priorities?

Today's reading from Acts takes place in Athens. That is Athens, Greece. That is not to be confused with Athens, Georgia, Athens, Kentucky, Athens, Tennessee, or the Athens of my home state—Alabama. Athens, Alabama, is just south of here over the state line. Each September that town holds an event in the town square known as the Athens Grease Festival. If you were to think that this is a celebration of Greek culture and history, you would be mistaken. It is not. It is a street fair featuring fried foods—it is the Athens GREASE Festival. They dress up in togas and fry fish, chicken, okra, Twinkies, whatever.

In our reading, the Apostle Paul is in the city of Athens (not Alabama). He has been run out of Thessalonica and Berea. Paul, along with his Christian colleagues Timothy and Silas, has been preaching in the synagogues of the region. They had some success in that they witnessed the conversion to Christianity of some Jews and some Greeks as well. In Thessalonica, however, the Jews get upset with Paul's activities and force him to leave town. He next goes to Berea but the people from

¹ I remember the first time I saw the mall. I had just moved to Tennessee and the mall was still under construction. I said to myself, "Why are they building a mall in the middle of a corn field?" Of course, twenty-five years later it is a small city.

Thessalonica hear of his efforts there and they go to Berea and initiate a mob against Paul and his colleagues. Paul's supporters usher him safely out of town and put him on the train for Athens. In Athens, he needs to lay low until Timothy and Silas are able catch up with him. (They had gotten separated.) Paul is in Athens for several days, maybe even weeks, and in this time he explores the city. Athens is one of the oldest named cities in the world. It has been continuously inhabited for 5000 years. The Athens of Paul's day was a major metropolitan city known for its schools and education. It was also part of the Roman Empire.

The people of Athens were known for always looking for the latest and greatest. Earlier in Acts, Luke pokes fun at them saying how all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new. They sound to me like the hipsters of the ancient world. In his exploration of Athens, Paul is distressed to see that the city is peppered with idols. He goes to the synagogue and he argues with the Jews. He engages in debate with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. Some call him a *babbler*. They don't understand his talk about Jesus and the resurrection. Finally, Paul is invited to the Areopagus to speak.

The Areopagus is a hill—a rock outcropping—in Athens. The Romans called it Mars Hill. Centuries earlier it had been the meeting place of the Athens ruling senate. By Paul's time, it appears to be a place of debate and discussion. To be invited to speak at the Areopagus was like being a musician and being invited to play at the Opry. It is an honor, a recognition that you are somebody worth listening to. To speak at the Areopagus is the ancient version of a TED Talk.

Having been invited, Paul takes his place before the crowd and declares, *Men of Athens, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. As I have been exploring your city I have carefully studied the objects of your worship.* Indeed, Athens being a cosmopolitan and cultural center, it would have had shrines and altars to a multitude of gods. Paul points out that he noticed among all these shrines one particular altar with the inscription *to an unknown god*. I imagine it was a minor shrine. Likely, someone had found fortune in their life and wanted to give thanks so they established this shrine. Not knowing which god to thank, they simply left it as *unknown*.

Paul picks up on this and says to the people, *what you worship as unknown, I know*. Paul then proceeds to offer a summary of his faith. He keeps it simple. He has already experienced the cynicism of the Athenians. Paul describes his God who is the creator of heaven and earth, who is the giver of life, and how this God is part of our lives. Paul even throws in a few quotes from Greek poets to make his case. Then Paul tells about Jesus and the resurrection and he calls all people to repent because they will be judged in righteousness.

Through this speech, Paul points out that this God does not exist in any shrine or altar. This God is not fashioned by human hands or served by human hands. This God is not gold or silver or stone or, as he says, *formed by the art and imagination of mortals*.

Paul is making the case that his God is not a god defined by people or confined to altars. Do the Athenians want to hear something new? This is certainly something new. Paul offers more than the simple sermon of an evangelist. He challenges the priorities of the Athenians. Paul raises the question, what is important to you? In what do you place your allegiance? What do you seek that gives your life meaning? Do you seek meaning in the small gods who can be manipulated? Do you seek that which brings only short-term fulfillment?

Paul's God—our God—is greater than all this. The Athenians had shrines to the small gods—the god of war, the god of wine, the goddess of the hearth, the god of love, the god of thunder and sky—each battling the others for attention. Paul's God is one and does not allow for the distractions of other gods.

As a missionary and evangelist, Paul himself personally suffered persecution. On many occasions he was arrested, beaten, and jailed. He continued on out of his love for the gospel. It is not uncommon today to hear Christians claim that Christianity is the victim of persecution and oppression. Yes, in some parts of the world that is true, but it is not the case in this country. Christians in the US are not persecuted. There is no war on Christmas. There may be singular acts of violence against churches (and these are reprehensible), but that is rare and not evidence of any widespread conspiracy. Christians are not denied jobs, or housing, or are assaulted because of their faith. There is, however, a real threat to our faith. This threat does not come from any outside force. The greatest threat to our faith is from within, from us, from the temptation to put things that are not God in front of God—to worship idols. As Christians, we are commanded to worship God and only God. Our scriptures are clear, *You shall have no other gods before me*.

I can make a list of examples of these temptations—our small gods—but that would not be helpful. It is up to each of us to decide what comes between us and God, what priorities are pushing God to the side. It will be different for each person. This is not about judging others on their actions or commitments. This is about us continually monitoring our relationship with our Lord and deciding what belongs to God and what doesn't.

It has been 25 years since that dress rehearsal. The performance went well but I still grieve how a small god was worshiped that day.